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Ask the expert: removing lead paint

Alcumus

18 April 2016

Chemicals (and COSHH)

Question:

We are planning overdue refurbishment of some legacy buildings. Concerns have arisen as to whether we are taking the correct precautions for removing old paint that might contain lead.

Answer:

Though leaded paint has not been used for many years, lead painted surfaces can still be found underneath existing paintwork in older buildings. The hazards from lead are well documented.

You may wish to check whether you are dealing with lead based paints using a lead test kit; otherwise, make the assumption that you are. Have you considered leaving the paintwork in situ if it's in good condition? This is the preferred option. You could paint over it after "keying" using wet abrasive paper. Old lead paint should only be removed if it is flaking away or if there is the real possibility of the painted surface being chewed or tampered with by children.

If you decide removal is the only option, make sure your contractors' workers are adequately instructed and understand the hazards and the control measures required. They should wear RPE with an assigned protection factor of 20 (FFP3 disposable mask or half mask with P3 filter), face fit tested. Also they should wear disposable overalls and gloves, and remove them before leaving the area.

Whether working inside or outside the building, cover adjacent surfaces with plastic sheeting and remove objects as far as possible. Keep anyone not involved out of the area until the job is finished, particularly pregnant females and children, until the area has been effectively cleaned. Workers should not smoke, eat or drink in the vicinity, and take rest and meal breaks away from the work area. Ensure good personal hygiene, thorough handwashing and avoid hand-to-mouth contamination.

Use a chemical paint stripper or a paint scraper with wet abrasive paper to remove the paint. If you are power tool sanding, use on-tool H or M class extraction units rather than passive capture bags. You could also use a hot air gun or infra-red equipment. In this case, take care that the paint does not burn and release fumes. You can do this by selecting a temperature setting below 500°C. For the same reason, never use blow lamps or gas torches to strip lead based paint, as these reach temperatures high enough to release lead fume into the atmosphere.

Whatever method is used, it is important to avoid dust and debris from becoming airborne. It should be carefully removed with a damp cloth, and the cloth, abrasive papers and other debris (including PPE) should then be placed in a plastic bag, sealed and disposed of safely.


It is unlikely that this type of intermittent work carried out under controlled conditions will create significant exposure sufficient to warrant air monitoring and biological monitoring but a risk assessment should be carried out to check.

*Keith Rhodes, senior health and safety consultant, **Alcumus Compliance**, a leading health, safety and environmental consultancy whose specialists develop tailored and workable solutions*

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